

Historical Note on Muazzam Nagar, a Gakkhar Stronghold on the River Indus

The Mughal emperor Akbar (1542-1605) carried out extensive administrative reforms throughout his empire and the territory west of the river Indus was made a part of the Kabul subah [1]. Kabul had been formally annexed in 1585 and its geo-strategic location was of utmost importance to the security and stability of the Mughal empire. It was a large province with difficult terrain and inhabited by a diverse and independent minded people. The authority of the Mughal emperors in some parts of the province was repeatedly challenged and in order to bring the situation under control, prolonged military operations were carried out throughout the 16-18th centuries [2].

Page | 1

The Mughal emperors continuously engaged the military services of the Gakkhar chiefs to compel the restive north-western region of their empire into subjugation. The practice started with the emperor Akbar and continued till the short reigns of the immediate successors of the emperor Alamgir (1618-1707). It finally came to an end when the Mughal empire completely lost its control over the region following the invasions of the Shah of Iran Nader Shah Afshar (1698-1747) and the Afghan king Ahmad Shah Abdali (1722-1772). The Gakkhar chiefs were appointed mansabdars of the Mughal empire for their services in the Kabul subah and granted fiefs in Pothohar and other areas as compensation. A few Gakkhar chiefs were even deputed to serve in the far flung areas of Afghanistan on military campaigns but generally they were posted in different parts of the present-day Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province [3, 4].

The involvement of Gakkhars as feudatories of the Mughal empire in controlling and pacifying the cis- and trans-Indus territories that today form a part of the Mianwali district may have been rewarded by grant of certain tracts of local territory as jagir starting with the emperor Akbar [5, 6]. There is a curious mention of two mahals called 'Narwi, on the Sind' and 'Himmat Khan Karmun' situated in the Sindh Sagar doab in the 'Ain-i-Akbari' with Gakkhars being recorded as the proprietors. These mahals and four others have been shown as being managed through the parganah of Akbarabad-Takhtpari. The relatively small size of these land holdings i.e. 997 bighas in case of 'Narwi, on the Sind' and 165 bighas in case of 'Himmat Khan Karmun' could be used as an argument to classify these mahals as jagirs only [6]. Anyone of these jagirs may have been located in the cis-Indus tract of the Mianwali district and granted by the emperor Akbar to a Gakkhar chief as compensation for his service.

The Gakkhars seem to have remained dominant in the northern part of the cis-Indus tract of Mianwali but their influence was continuously challenged by the local tribes especially the Niazis. They were compelled to relinquish their territorial possessions during the reign of

emperor Jahangir (1569-1627). In the subsequent years, Gakkhars managed to restore some of their earlier dominance but their hold on the area remained uncertain [5].

During the reign of the emperor Alamgir, the original inhabitants of the cis-Indus tract of the Mianwali district belonged to the Sumbal branch of the Niazi tribe and held both the eastern and western banks of the river. Their principal settlement located on the eastern bank of the river was called Dhankot [7, 1]. In 1662-63, the emperor visited the area and stayed at what can only be described as a garrison town known as Muazzam Nagar. This military station was positioned on the eastern bank of the river Indus as well presumably in close proximity of Dhankot. The emperor was infuriated by the troublesome attitude of the Sumbals and ordered their eviction from the eastern bank of the river. The Sumbals resisted, faced stern military action, and were forced to retire to the other bank [7, 8]. The location of the present-day town of Kalabagh may be identified as the general area that was once held by the Sumbals on the western bank of the river Indus.

Page | 2

If Muazzam Nagar had existed during the reign of emperor Akbar, it would have been mentioned in any of the official chronicles. The town must have been established during the reigns of any of the subsequent emperors either Jahangir or Shah Jahan (1592-1666). As Mughal emperors became more and more concerned about the state of affairs at the boundary of the subahs of Punjab and Kabul in the north-west, Muazzam Nagar became central to the authority of their empire in the region [9, 10].

Muazzam Nagar also became associated with the Gakkhar chiefs who were deputed to administer it as they realized its strategic location and transformed it into a stronghold [5]. Apparently, Sultan Fateh Khan (from Andarhal-Mirpur) was the first Gakkhar chief who was appointed to administer Muazzam Nagar. For his military service, he was granted the parganah of Dangali as fief in lieu of compensation [11]. Sultan Fateh Khan was a brother of Sultan Mira Khan who had founded Mirpur in 1641-42 and he may have been in active service during the early years of emperor Alamgir's reign. His son and two of his grandsons served the Mughal empire as well and the family managed to retain the parganah of Dangali as fief for three consecutive generations. Sultan Asalat Khan, a Seh-hazari mansabdar was one of the grandsons of Sultan Fateh Khan as noted above and he too administered Muazzam Nagar probably towards the end of emperor Alamgir's reign when his son prince Mirza Muhammad Muazzam (1643-1712) was the governor of the Kabul subah [3, 4, 11].

In 1748, a part of the Afghan king Ahmad Shah Abdali's army crossed the river Indus at Kalabagh and attacked Muazzam Nagar. The attacking army must have faced considerable resistance at Muazzam Nagar and in the ensuing battle the town was razed to the ground. It

has been reported that the remains of Muazzam Nagar were visible six miles south of Mianwali on the left high bank of the river Indus as late as 1870 when the site finally eroded away by the swelling of the river [5].

References

Page | 3

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